

Sonderdruck



ORBIS TERRARUM

Alte Geschichte

Band 20 (2022)

Franz Steiner Verlag

*Internationale Zeitschrift
für historische Geographie der Alten Welt*

*Journal of Historical Geography
of the Ancient World*

*Revue internationale de la géographie historique
du monde antique*

*Rivista internazionale di geografia storica
del mondo antico*

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THE DAHAI, THE EARLY ARSAKIDS, AND THE GREEK-MACEDONIAN PRESENCE IN NORTHEASTERN IRAN AND CENTRAL ASIA

Marek Jan Olbrycht

Abstract: Various aspects of the presence of Greeks and Macedonians in the Parthian state and the influence of Greek culture on the Parthians and their Arsakid state have been addressed in the scholarship.¹ In this article I will focus on the pre-Arsakid Dahai and the early Arsakids, and their attitudes towards the Greeks and Macedonians and towards Greek-Macedonian culture as well. I am not going to repeat well-known findings about the Greeks' presence in Parthia after Mithradates I (165–133/2 B.C.). Elsewhere I have addressed this topic in detail, trying to put the problem in order and clarify contentious or incomprehensible issues.² The Greek-Macedonian presence in Western and Central Asia is well known chiefly from archaeological excavations and from epigraphic and numismatic evidence from Babylonia, northern Mesopotamia, western Iran, and Bactria.³ As for the regions of Parthia proper (Iranian Khorasan and southern Turkmenistan) and Hyrkania (Iranian Gorgan) in the post-Achaemenid (Hellenistic) and early Arsakid periods, the data are much more sparse. This is even more true for the steppe peoples including the Dahai.

Keywords: Dahai, Parthia, Greek-Macedonian presence, Iran, Chirik Rabat.

1. The Dahai in the Late Achaemenid and Early Hellenistic Periods

The state of the Parthians, ruled by a dynasty called the Arsakids after its founder, Arsakes I, was formed as a result of the conquest of northeastern Iran by the steppe Dahai coming from Central Asia.⁴ The Dahai had maintained political and cultural connections with the Achaemenid Empire starting from the 5th century B.C. until the Macedonian invasion of Alexander.⁵ Afterwards, they had close contacts with

1 See WOLSKI 1963; 1983a; 1983b; KOSHELENKO 1979; WIESEHÖFER 2000; idem 2015; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2003; MERKELBACH / STAUBER 2005; DABROWA 2011; OLBRYCHT 2021.

2 OLBRYCHT 2017.

3 Babylonia and Mesopotamia: BOIY 2004; MITTAG 2014; Bactria: LINDSTRÖM ET AL. (eds.) 2013; MAIRS 2014; MAIRS (ed.) 2020; Hellenistic Iran: MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2003; KOSMIN 2014.

4 For the early Arsakid state, see: BALAKHVANTSEV 2017; OVERTOOM 2016; idem 2020; OLBRYCHT 2021.

5 BALAKHVANTSEV 2017, 28–41; OLBRYCHT 2021, 21–2.

the Greek-Macedonian world as steppe dwellers in the period of Alexander (who reigned in Iran and parts of Central Asia in 330–323) and his successors.⁶

The Dahai first appear in an Old Persian inscription of Xerxes at Persepolis as Dahā (XPh §4). In the late Achaemenid period and under Alexander the Great, the Dahai were, like the Massagetai, closely linked to the Achaemenid satrapies of Sogdiana and Bactria politically and economically. The Dahai supported the Achaemenid king Darius III in his war against Alexander in 331 (battle of Gaugamela).⁷ Afterwards the Dahai, along with the Sakai from beyond the Iaxartes/Syr Daryā and the Massagetai, strongly aided Spitamenes and other commanders in the fight against the invading Macedonians.⁸ During this war, Spitamenes with his Dahan and Massagetai troops destroyed a Macedonian corps at the Polytimetus (Zeravshan) River (Arr. *An.* 4.5.4–9; 4.6.1–2; Curt. 7.7.31–39). Finally, Alexander defeated Spitamenes and reached a compromise agreement with the Dahai. Central Asian mounted archers (*hippotoxotai*), one of the most effective military forces of the ancient world, appeared in Alexander's army early in the Indian campaign, during the heavy fighting for Aornos (Arr. *An.* 4.28.8) and then played a pivotal role in the battle of the Hydaspes river (Arr. *An.* 5.12.2; 5.16.4; 5.18.3; Curt. 8.14.5). The *hippotoxotai* division in India was composed of the Dahai – Arrian (*An.* 5.12.2) explicitly calls them “horse archers”. The mounted archers fought in India and then in southern Iran exclusively in combination with picked Macedonian units.⁹

The Dahai as select troops in the army of Alexander had the opportunity to become thoroughly familiar with the Macedonian art of war, which influenced the development and refinement of their own warfare. At that time, the Dahai inhabited the lands along the middle and lower Syr Daryā, and they were the neighbors of Khorasmia to the east of the lower Āmū Daryā.¹⁰ In particular, the habitation area of the Dahai included the land of the Chirik Rabat culture (5th – early 2nd century B.C.) in the lower Syr Daryā and in the Zhany Daryā region. Thus, the Chirik Rabat archaeological horizon can be associated, at least in part, with the Dahai.¹¹

One of the significant early Hellenistic undertakings in the borderlands of the steppes of Central Asia was an expedition (presumably including a few campaigns) led by the Seleukid commander Demodamas at the end of the 4th century, in which he operated in Sogdiana and the Syr Daryā basin.¹² To these activities on the northern borders of the Seleukid Empire belonged exploratory raids on the Caspian Sea

6 For details, see VOGELSANG 1993, 581–2; OLBRYCHT 1996, 148–58.

7 In his description of the Iranian contingents at Gaugamela Arrian knows the Dahai and Scythians cooperating with the Bactrians (*An.* 3.11.3 and 3.11.6), while Curtius mentions explicitly the Dahai and Massagetai (4.12.6–7) fighting alongside the Bactrians.

8 OLBRYCHT 1996; 1998, 41–4; 2004, 128–48; SHCHEGLOV 2006.

9 See Arr. *An.* 4.28.8; 5.12.2; 5.20.3; 5.22.5; 6.5.5; 6.6.1; 6.21.3; 6.22.1; Curt. 8.14.5; 9.2.24 (cf. 9.2.33). Cf. OLBRYCHT 2004, 128–31, 135, 156–61, 165–70.

10 Arr. *An.* 3.28.8–10; Strab. 11.9.3; Curt. 8.1.8.

11 LITVINSKII 1972, 173. For the Chirik Rabat culture, see: VAINBERG / LEVINA 1992; KURMANKULOV / UTUBAEV 2013; BONORA 2019; OLBRYCHT 2021, 283–6.

12 OLBRYCHT 1998, 44. For Demodamas, see BEARZOT 2017.

coast undertaken by Patrokles.¹³ It seems that in connection with these Seleukid military campaigns should be seen the foundation of the fortress of Uzundara which controlled one of the major roads from Sogdiana to Bactria in the Baisun Mountains.¹⁴

It is possible that the early Seleukid military actions in Sogdiana and on the Iaxartes somehow affected the Chirik Rabat tribes and forced them to (at least partially) migrate. Some of the Dahai probably remained in the Lower Syr Daryā basin even after the majority had migrated to the steppes of southern Turkmenistan and began to penetrate Seleukid territory; they destroyed some cities in Margiana and Areia in northeastern Iran.¹⁵ In this way the tribes of the Dahai occupied the steppe and desert areas of the Karakum on the border of Seleukid Hyrkania and Parthia and regularly pillaged the frontier areas (Strab. 11.8.2–3). The next stage in the expansion of the Dahai occurred during Arsakes I's attacks on Khorasan and Gor-gan, around 250–240 B.C. From that time, the Dahai remained associated with the Arsakid state.¹⁶

Archaeological excavations in Chirik Rabat in 2005 and 2008 yielded two inscriptions, one in Aramaic script on a flask, and another in the Greek language made in ink on an alabaster vase. The latter inscription bears the phrase A | ΚΑΣΙ, “one (mina) of casia.”¹⁷ Casia is generally identified as a sort of cinnamon.¹⁸ However, it seems that it was not uncommon to consider casia as a separate substance from cinnamon.¹⁹ Thus, in a Didyma inscription from the time of Seleukos I, cinnamon and casia are listed side by side as valuable gifts to the oracle and the sanctuary of Apollo.²⁰ This is not the place to discuss the links between casia and cinnamon in detail. What is certain, however, is that casia was a precious and rare substance, valued as a special gift in the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

According to the scholars who published the Chirik Rabat inscription, the vessel and the Greek inscription can be dated to the 3rd–2nd centuries B.C.²¹ In all likelihood, the historical context points to the 3rd century B.C., when the Chirik Rabat culture demonstrated considerable vitality; one might even assume the first half of the 3rd century and the time of Seleukos I and Antiochos I. It seems highly probable

13 BNJ 712 T3b (Plin. *nat.* 6.58). On Patrokles: WILLIAMS 2016 (BNJ 712).

14 This Seleukid fortress, excavated in the recent years, was built no later than under Antiochos I. See DVURECHENSKAYA 2019.

15 Plin. *nat.* 6.47–48; 6.93. Cf. Strab. 11.10.1 and Berossos, *FGrH/BNJ* 680 F10. Details in: OLBRYCHT 1998, 44–6.

16 OLBRYCHT 2021, 21–5.

17 IVANTCHIK / LUR’E 2013.

18 On cinnamon, casia (and cassia), see Hdt. 3.110–111; Theophr. *Hist. pl.* 9.5.1, 3; Plin. *nat.* 6.174; 12.82, 87–8, 93; Dioskorides 1.13; Strab. 16.4.14. Cf. WARMINGTON 1974, 185–7, 191, 193, 224, 227, 368, 370. For casia/cassia, see HÜNEMÖRDER 2006a.

19 For cinnamon (κιννάμωμον), see Hdt. 3.107, 110–111; Plin. *nat.* 12.89–94; Arr. *an.* 7.20; Theophr. *Hist. pl.* 9.5.1f. Cf. HÜNEMÖRDER 2006b.

20 *I.Didyma* 424 = WELLES 1934, no. 5, l. 50–1; 288/7 B.C. The Didyma gift of Seleukos I included two minas (around 1kg) of casia while the vessel from Chirik Rabat contained one mina of that spice.

21 IVANTCHIK / LUR’E 2013, 291–2.

that the discovery of a vessel with precious casia should be associated with Seleukid activities in the Syr Daryā region. It is well known that Seleukos I and his commander Demodamas conducted military operations in Central Asia, including the Syr Daryā basin. The latter set up altars to Apollo of Didyma near those already constructed by “Cyrus, Semiramis, and Alexander” on the Iaxartes/Syr Daryā.²² Demodamas was engaged in cultic and civic-political activities in Didyma and Miletos,²³ which were linked with Apame, the wife of Seleukos and daughter of the Sogdian prince Spitamenes.²⁴ Thus, the find from Chirik Rabat fits into the context of the Seleukid policy whereby Seleukos I and Antiochos I attempted to secure the Empire’s borders in Sogdiana and on the Iaxartes. They must have maintained some contacts with the Chirik Rabat tribes at the time and were certainly sending diplomatic gifts. The vessel with casia may have been a present from the Seleukids to a local prince in Chirik Rabat. In any case, the available written sources and the inscription from Chirik Rabat suggest that there were contacts between the Seleukids and the Dahai prior to the foundation of the Arsakid state.

The Dahai, the progenitors of the Arsakid Dynasty, ever since the time of Alexander had enjoyed a reputation as excellent mounted warriors (chiefly horse archers) and frequently served as mercenaries in Seleukid armies, such as in the battles of Raphia (217) and Magnesia (190).²⁵ It is quite possible that they fought even earlier at Ipsos (301): in the army of Seleukos I there were 12,000 horsemen, “including mounted archers.”²⁶ As for the first half of the 3rd century, sources have nothing to say about the ethnic composition of the Seleukid armies, but it is not impossible that then, too, the Dahai served in Seleukid forces, continuing the practice of Alexander and Seleukos I. The Dahan mercenaries were able to gain insights into the situation in the Seleukid Empire’s provinces and its neighbors. One such mercenary might have been Arsakes I, the founder of the Arsakid state and apparently an experienced soldier.²⁷ He might have fought in Anatolia under Antiochos II Theos (261–246), where the Galatians, regional rulers, and Egypt kept causing unrest; likewise, he might have served in Bactria as well. Later stories of Arsakes’ Bactrian origins may have stemmed from this last episode.²⁸ Arsakes invaded the province of Parthia once he heard the news that Seleukos II had been defeated at Ankyra in Asia Minor (*Iust.* 41.4.7). Thus, events in Anatolia were closely linked to the birth of the Arsakid monarchy in northeastern Iran.

22 Plin. *nat.* 6.49. See OLBRYCHT 1998, 44.

23 *I.Didyma* 480; Plin. *nat.* 6.49.

24 Apame: Arr. *an.* 7.4.6; Plut. *Demetr.* 31.5. Strabo (15.8.15) confuses Apame from Sogdiana with the daughter of the Persian official Artabazos.

25 Raphia: Polyb. 5.79.3; Magnesia: Liv. 37.40; App. *Syr.* 32. For the Dahai as mercenary units in the Seleukid period, see: GRIFFITH 1935, 143–5, 167 and 251.

26 See Diod. 20.113.4. Cf. OLBRYCHT 2005.

27 The sources portray Arsakes as a military leader, although they use a relay of negative clichés. See *Iust.* 41.4.6–7; Amm. 23.6.2; *Suda*, s.v. Ἀρσάκης.

28 LERNER 1999, 14.

2. The Dahai in Northeastern Iran: Arsakes versus Andragoras

The Dahan ruler Arsakes invaded northeastern Iran and defeated Andragoras, the former satrap of the region and the then independent ruler of his satrapy of Parthia and Hyrkania.²⁹ Andragoras' origins are disputable.³⁰ One possibility is that he was a Greek from Cyprus; under Alexander and his successors, the Cypriote Greeks, like Stasanor and Stasander, served as satraps in Areia (Herat region) and Bactria. Andragoras may have come from this background. The name "Andragoras" is relatively rare in the Hellenistic world. The oldest record is from Amathous in Cyprus (end of the 4th century B.C.). Sporadically, the name is on record in the Doric Aegean (Crete, Rhodes, Thera) until the 1st century B.C. and in Alexandreia in Egypt (*ca.* 250–215 B.C.).³¹ It is possible, however, that Andragoras was an Iranian who used a Greek name. Such situations occurred in 3rd century Babylonia where the native officials took Greek names (like Anu-uballit – Kephalon in Seleukid Uruk).³²

An inscription with Andragoras' name was discovered in Hyrkania (northeastern Iran).³³ The text proves that Hyrkania belonged to the structure of the Seleukid Empire. Andragoras appears in the inscription without a title, as do other dignitaries. The document names King Antiochos I and Queen Stratonike. Likely, Andragoras was Seleukid governor of Parthia and Hyrkania at that time. At some point, he rebelled against his sovereigns and minted coins in his name which include gold (staters)³⁴ and silver (tetradrachms)³⁵ specimens. They feature the name ΑΝΔΡΑΓΟΡΟΥ inscribed in Greek without any title. The staters depict a bearded man's head with a diadem on the obverse, and a winged goddess (Nike?) and a warrior in a quadriga on the reverse. The male figure in the quadriga is probably Andragoras: he wears a Macedonian-type cuirass as well as an Oriental *kyrbasia* headdress. Andragoras' coins refer to both Oriental and Greek iconography, and the same applies to the content. In the Greek-Macedonian world, Nike in the quadriga symbolized military victory. But in Iranian tradition, the image of an armed goddess alluded to Anahita (Arədū Sūrā Anāhitā).³⁶

In the Hellenistic world of Western Asia, the diadem was a royal attribute,³⁷ so the image on the staters minted by Andragoras implies that he clearly strove for royal power and acted against the Seleukids. The bearded person on the obverse must be Andragoras himself, who refrained from using the royal title of *basileus* on

29 On Arsakes I and the early Arsakid state, see: BALAKHANTSEV 2017; OVERTOOM 2016; 2020; OLBRYCHT 2021.

30 For details on Andragoras, see OLBRYCHT 2018; 2020 (with further literature).

31 OLBRYCHT 2021, 83–4.

32 DOTY 1988; BOIY 2002, 47–60.

33 ROUGEMONT 2012, no. 76. This inscription has been analyzed elsewhere in detail and only the main findings are presented here. See OLBRYCHT 2021, 84–7.

34 Type MITCHINER 1975, 19.

35 Type MITCHINER 1975, 20.

36 On Anahita, see CHAUMONT 1985, 1006. On Anahita as a war goddess, see FARRIDNEJAD 2018, 269, 290.

37 RITTER 1965; LICHTENBERGER ET AL. (eds.) 2012; OLBRYCHT 2014.

the coins. On the obverse, Andragoras' tetradrachms feature the head of a goddess in a turreted crown (*corona muralis*), and on the reverse a standing Athena left. Wearing a *corona muralis*, the goddess may be visually identified as Greek Tyche. It seems, however, that this figure was understood by Iranians as a deity linked to the Iranian concept of royal glory (*khvarenah*).³⁸ On Parthian coinages of the 1st century B.C., one can see such a goddess presenting a wreath or diadem to the king.³⁹ Moreover, an allusion to Anahita, the patron deity of Iran's kings, cannot be excluded, as this goddess has a crenellated crown as one of her attributes.⁴⁰

It is possible that rare coins struck in the name of Vakhshuvar (Vahšvar) should be attributed to Andragoras. These are gold coins of two types: Type A depicts the ruler's bust wearing a soft tiara/*kyrbasia* on the obverse, a horse quadriga led by a charioteer with a whip on the reverse, and Aramaic inscriptions on both sides;⁴¹ Type B shows Athena and some letters on the obverse, a winged Nike and an Aramaic inscription on the reverse.⁴² These coins, if attributed to Andragoras, were addressed chiefly to the Iranian population, but contain elements of Greek and Oriental iconography.⁴³

The example of Andragoras proves that Hellenistic Parthia-Hyrkania was influenced by Greek-Macedonian culture. The coins minted in the name of Andragoras use Greek iconography and the name of the potentate is written in Greek. The administration used Greek, as Andragoras' inscription demonstrates. We can therefore conclude that in the satrapy of Parthia and Hyrkania there were significant communities of Greeks and Macedonians, to whom the inscription and coins were addressed. However, coins minted in the name of Vakhshuvar provide evidence that Aramaic was still used and that care was taken to convey political agendas to the Iranians.

3. New Challenges: From Parthia and Hyrkania to Babylonia

The question arises whether there are indications for the existence of major clusters of Greeks in Parthia and Hyrkania in the 3rd century B.C. when, following the downfall of Andragoras, the Arsakid state was established. In 330, Alexander the Great founded a city called Alexandria in Parthia proper.⁴⁴ No traces of this city are known but its existence as the first colony of Alexander in Asia is very likely. However, we do not know if it survived in some form until the time of Arsakes I.

A major concentration of Greeks found its place in Antiocheia in Margiana (ancient Merv), located on the road from Parthia proper, via the northernmost

38 For Anahita and *khvarenah*, see FARRIDNEJAD 2018, 373.

39 CALMEYER 1979, Abb. 2.5.

40 FARRIDNEJAD 2018, 272–6.

41 Type MITCHINER 1975, 34; ALRAM 1986, no. 382.

42 Type MITCHINER 1975, 35; ALRAM 1986, no. 383.

43 See OLBRYCHT 2021, 96–9.

44 Plin. *nat.* 6.113: *regio Nisiaea Parthyenes nobilis, ubi Alexandria a conditore.* See OLBRYCHT 2004, 208–11.

fringes of Areia (with the Serakhs oasis), to Bactria and Sogdiana. A strong Greek influence over material culture, particularly in pottery and building techniques (huge Greek-style fortifications), is visible in Merv during the Hellenistic and Arsakid periods.⁴⁵ This implies the presence of large numbers of Greek settlers. Margiana was strongly connected with Bactria, and the latter was a major center of Greek culture thanks to the considerable presence of Hellenic colonists from as early as Alexander's time. A pivotal Greek participation is seen in the creation and development of the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom which controlled Margiana until the Parthian conquest.⁴⁶

On the site of the old city of Merv, Gyaurkala, Alexander established his foundation called Alexandreia which was renamed in Antiocheia under Antiochos I.⁴⁷ The city is mentioned relatively accurately by Pliny the Elder (*nat.* 6.46–47) who relies on well-informed sources: *Margiane . . . in qua Alexander Alexandriam considerat; qua diruta a barbaris Antiochus Seleuci filius eodem loco restituit Syrianam interfluente Margo qui corrivatur in Zotha lacu; maluerat illam Antiochiam appellari. Urbis amplitudo circumlitur stadiis LXX. In hanc Orodes Romanos Crassana clade captos deduxit.* The term "Syrianam" suggests that there were "Syrian" inhabitants settled in Margiana, i.e. settlers coming from Seleukid Babylonia. The designation "Syrians" refers in some classical sources to the Semitic speaking population of Babylonia. Thus, Flavius Josephus (*Ant.* 18.372–4) speaks of the Syrians and Hellenes as the major parts of the inhabitants of Seleukeia on the Tigris.⁴⁸

Antiochos I took great care of the city of Antiocheia in Margiana, surrounding it with powerful fortifications. This is said to have been one of the most attractive places in Central Asia for the Greeks. Strabo's description (11.10.1–2) provides the seed of fascination about Margiana (and neighboring Areia) by Antiochos I.

Margiana was subjugated by the Parthians only around 160–150 B.C. under Mithradates I.⁴⁹ Antiocheia became a significant Parthian metropolis with great economic and political potential. Greek culture from Margiana influenced areas of eastern Parthia proper. Examination of archaeological materials from northern Parthia proper, especially from the Akhal area (the Kopetdagh foothill plain around the Parthian centers of New Nisa and Old Nisa), reveals an almost total absence of Greek influence, particularly in the pottery types of the early Hellenistic period around 330–200 B.C., unlike neighbouring Atak (the Kopetdagh foothill plain southeast of the Nisa region) in which Greek pottery forms part of the material culture. The Atak region features a much stronger Greek influence in the 3rd–2nd centuries B.C. due to its proximity to Margiana. The scope of Greek influence in the ceramics of Akhal increased in the 2nd century B.C.⁵⁰ This happened after Parthia

45 See ZAVYALOV 2007; PUSCHNIGG 2008.

46 For Graeco-Bactria, see LERNER 1999; MITTAG 2006, 27–46; 2009, 111–6; 2013, 115–24; MAIRS 2014; MAIRS (ed.) 2020.

47 COHEN 2013, 245–50.

48 For the Babylonians as "Syrians," see GOODBLATT 1987, esp. 602–3, note 3.

49 OLBRYCHT 2010.

50 Details in PILIPKO 2012.

had become an empire and the Arsakids incorporated Margiana and Western Iran, along with its Greek clusters, into their empire.

Generally, there are no major discoveries of archaeological traces of Greek culture in Hyrkania and Parthia proper in the Seleukid and early Arsakid periods. Fortunately, we have an important account of the Greek presence in Hyrkania. Polybios tells us about Syrinx, the capital of Hyrkania, which was an example of a city with a mixed Iranian and Greek population. It was fortified well by the Parthians, apparently using Greek experts. The fortifications included three lines of defence with proteichisma. In 209 B.C. the armed forces of Antiochos III besieged the city. When the main wall fell, undermined by Seleukid troops, the city's Parthian defenders killed all the Greek inhabitants and tried to flee. Seleukid mercenaries blocked their path of flight and forced those retreating to seek shelter in the city. Attacked by Antiochos' units, the Parthians surrendered (Polyb. 10.31.6–13). The slaughter of the Greeks was an outcome of a fear that they would betray Arsakes II in favor of the Seleukid kings who had previously been their monarchs. That the Greeks from Syrinx were seen as not particularly loyal to the new Arsakid power is not surprising, as the they may have assumed that the Arsakid rule was ephemeral, especially in the face of the powerful army of Antiochos III. Paradoxically, however, the campaign of Antiochos III in Parthia proper and Hyrkania was the last Seleukid invasion to reach these lands. The territorially large Seleukid Empire turned out to be a colossus on clay legs.

The main center of Parthia proper under the late Achaemenids and in the Hellenistic-early Arsakid age was the city of Hekatompylos, the old capital of the Parthian satrapy, located in its western reaches, probably at Shahr-e Qomesh near Damghan.⁵¹ Appian (*Syr.* 57) recognizes Hekatompylos as the foundation of Seleukos I, which is an anachronism as the city flourished under the late Achaemenids⁵² and Alexander. Curtius (6.2.15) names the city in connection with Alexander's pursuit of Darius III and claims that it was "founded by the Greeks." Diodoros (17.75.1) knows "Hekatontapylos" as a particularly rich city under Alexander. We are informed that Antiochos III rested his army at Hekatompylos which was "in the middle of Parthia [Parthyene]" (Polyb. 10.28.7. Cf. 10.29.1). As with many other foundations, Seleukos officially re-founded the existing city, and a number of Greek settlers probably appeared there in the early Seleukid period. Aside from small sections, however, the area of the city remains unexplored.⁵³

In the 2nd century B.C., Mihrdatkirt (the site of Old Nisa) began to play a prominent role as an Arsakid fortified center in the region of northern Parthia. There is no mention of Greeks in the texts found in the Nisa archives encompassing the period ca. 151/150–12/11 B.C. Moreover, all the dated documents are in Parthian.⁵⁴

51 Hekatompylos: Polyb. 10.28.7, 29.1; Strabo 11.9.1; Plin. *nat.* 6.44, 61, 113; Amm. 23.6.44; Ptol. 6.5.2; *Tab. Peut.* XI.2 (Hecatopolis in Parthia). A detailed discussion is offered by COHEN 2013, 210–5.

52 Shahr-e Qomesh yielded finds of the Achaemenid period, see HANSMAN / STRONACH 1970, 34. Cf. HANSMAN / STRONACH 1974.

53 OLBRYCHT 2021, 196.

54 BADER 1996; WEBER 2010, 492–588.

The religious practices attested in the Nisa archives and the calendar in local use were exclusively Iranian. The materials from Old Nisa demonstrate a certain degree of Greek influence in art and architecture,⁵⁵ but there was certainly no far-reaching Hellenization of the early Parthian society. It seems that the Arsakids brought groups of Greek artisans to Old Nisa. They may have come from well attested Greek clusters in Hyrkania, Margiana, and Greek communities of Media.

A fragment of an inscription, including two Greek letters, on a wall painting was discovered at Old Nisa in the “Tower-like building.”⁵⁶ Rhyton no. 76 from Old Nisa bears an inscription with the Greek name Ἐστίας. G.A. KOSHELENKO believes that this refers to the Iranian god of fire, while P. BERNARD assumes that it signifies a Greek cult.⁵⁷ In all likelihood, the rhytons discovered at Nisa were probably not made in Parthia, but more likely in a Greek ethnic environment, such as Graeco-Bactria. This interpretation can be supported by a newly discovered inscription from Kuliab in Tadzhikistan (northern Bactria).⁵⁸ In this dedication to “Hestia, eldest, most honored of gods”, “the greatest king Euthydemos” and his son Demetrios are mentioned. Thus the cult of Hestia took a special place in Graeco-Bactria. It could have included elements which the Iranians interpreted as their own fire worship traditions.

In some aspects of their rule, the Arsakids adopted Seleukid institutions and traditions, primarily their economic policies and administrative framework.⁵⁹ Economic considerations were a crucial factor, as maintaining Seleukid practices would prove indispensable. One of the Seleukid traditions which Arsakes I adopted was the monetary system, or at least its main components. The coins of the Seleukid Empire had carried Greek legends and largely Greek-Macedonian motifs, but these monetary issues had to take into account the needs and tastes of the Iranian population. Such was the case with the coins with the image of Apollo with a bow, minted under Antiochos I, which conveyed clear allusions to Iranian Mithra.⁶⁰ Other studies have addressed the issue of royal propaganda and titles which were used by the early Arsakids.⁶¹

As for the Arsakids, it turned out to be impossible to discontinue either the use of the old minting workshops or the Greek legends and iconography on coins without risking disastrous economic consequences. Like Seleukid coinage, Parthian tetradrachms (minted since Mithradates I), drachms and bronze coins were based on the Attic standard. The early Arsakid coins bear Greek legends and Iranian iconographic motifs, like the *kyrbasia* crown, and some of them feature legends in the Aramaic script (under Arsakes I). The royal diadem represents an interesting element of the tradition of Achaemenid Iranian kingship, adopted by Alexander the

55 PILIPKO 2001; INVERNIZZI / LIPPOLIS 2008.

56 ROUGEMONT 2012, no. 78.

57 KOSHELENKO 1967; BERNARD 1985, 90.

58 See ROUGEMONT 2012, no. 151 (first edition in 2004).

59 On the Seleukid legacy in Parthia, see WOLSKI 1969; 1989; DĄBROWA 2011, 123–8.

60 IOSSIF 2011.

61 OLBRYCHT 2013.

Great, and the Hellenistic royalty, applied by both Greek-Macedonian and Oriental rulers, including the Arsakids.⁶²

Further concentrations of Greeks fell within the Arsakid state after the conquest of Media, as well as Susa and Susiana in the 140s under Mithradates I. The largest city with a Greek population east of the Euphrates, Seleukeia on the Tigris, was incorporated into the Arsakid state in 141 B.C. There were other clusters of Greeks in Babylonia and northern Mesopotamia, including those in Babylon, Uruk and Nineveh.⁶³

After the conquest of Babylonia in 141 B.C., for the first time in the history of Parthian minting, King Mithradates I (165–133/2 B.C.) ordered the issue of coinage with the legend ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ, “Loving the Greeks” (140/139 and 139/138 B.C.).⁶⁴ This measure was of profound significance in terms of royal propaganda, as an attempt to win the favour of the Greek inhabitants of the newly annexed territories of Babylonia and Mesopotamia, particularly Seleukeia on the Tigris.

4. Epilogue

In general, the Dahai, and therefore the early Arsakids as well, were acquainted with the Hellenistic kingdoms in Asia and Greek culture. The pre-Arsakid Dahai, which had served in the armies of Alexander the Great and of the Seleukids, were able to observe and to some extent assimilate Greek-Macedonian cultural patterns and elements of the art of war. To some degree, they were part of the political system in the post-Achaemenid (Hellenistic) period in Central Asia. Thus the Dahai were not some people from remote and obscure regions of Central Asia: they were familiar with Greek-Macedonian culture and political traditions well before they conquered the former Seleukid satrapy of Parthia and Hyrkania. These factors must be taken into account when looking at the role of the Dahai in creating the Arsakid state in northeastern Iran.

The Arsakids, with their Dahan legacy, were adroit in blending the preservation of the main components of the Iranian and steppe cultures that made up the core of their ethos with political pragmatism. The Arsakid Parthians appreciated Greek culture, which turned out to be very attractive, especially in iconography. However, Greek iconographic elements should often be read as a means of conveying Oriental content. Hellenization of the Parthian elite and of the Arsakid Dynasty in particular was never profound and it did not impact elements that were of fundamental importance to the Parthian ethos. In their policy towards the Greeks, the Arsakids were guided by pragmatism and dynastic interests. If necessary, they took repressive measures (as in Syrinx under Arsakes II) or they tried to win over the Greeks politically (e.g., the use of the Philhellene title on coins by Mithradates I).

62 OLBRYCHT 2014.

63 See MITTAG 2014; KLINKOTT 2021.

64 Full titulature is: ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ, see SELLWOOD 1980, type 13. Cf. DĄBROWA 2011, 39–45.

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